THE EFFECTS OF ROMANTIC MUSIC, BAROQUE MUSIC, AND ROCK MUSIC ON THE HEARTBEAT AND STABILITY OF LISTENERS

or

HOW TO SEE THE MOON THROUGH A BOTTLE OF BLACK TOWER

or

HE WENT THAT-A-WAY

A

A unique endeavor.
Truly an artistic
work in its own right.
Bravo

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THE SCIENCE PROJECT
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THE SCIENCE PROJECT

James Huneker, in his admirable book Chopin: The Man and His Music commented on Chopin's famous "Revolutionary" Etude in C minor, op. 10, no. 12:

> The study is full of tremendous pathos; it compasses the sublime, and in its most torrential moments, the composer never quite loses his mental equipoise. He, too, can evoke tragic spirits, and at will send them scurrying back to their own profound.

It is not often that a measly piece of piano music draws such an emotional, ungrammatical response from a listener. Contributing factors making it even more rare include the necessity of a first-rate performer, a high quality piano, and an appropriate listening environment. It would be entirely inappropriate, for example, to listen to Chopin on the beach, where Sammy Hagar or the Who would be appropriate.

It is so rare for circumstances to make thoroughly listening to and enjoying music possible that these times are memorable indeed. I was never more affected by a pianist than I was when I saw William Ransom, Assistant Professor of Music at Emory University and concert pianist throughout the south, perform Franck's Piano Quintet in F Minor in 1984 at the Sewanee Music Festival in Sewanee, Tennessee. However, I was just as affected one day recently when I heard a song by the Moody Blues called "Question."

I still think that the song speaks accurately for me, and I also think that the Quintet is a fine piece, but the two pieces of music have never quite touched me the same way twice.

Why these particular performances got to me more than others is one of the many questions I will try to answer in

this fast-paced thriller we know as "The Science Project," so imaginatively named by our illustrious science instructor "Wild Bill" Eggert.

TSP

Through my extemsive experience with music of all kinds, I have come to the unscientific conclusion that rock music, itself a realization of abstract energy (either creative, physical, or both), is more effective at stirring up some sort of emotion in myself and in others than is Romantic piano or orchestral music, and Romantic music is more effective at this than Baroque keyboard[1] or chamber music. This conclusion is not as reasonless as it may seem; I was surprised one day to find that nineteenth century music could stir me almost as much as rock music. I was really surprised to find that the same was true of some Baroque music.

I should add, however, that mine is the type that can, under certain circumstances, be stirred by the pathos of the sound of a door closing, or by the majesty of looking at someone I have known for ten years without even recognizing them.

This reminds me of one almost preposterous incident in January when I was eating dinner at 1:00 A.M. at Wag's with Pete Winders. We would often do this sort of thing-- eat out at bizarre hours of the night-- and some pretty strange people would stroll in to Wag's.

So there we were, eating and talking about how unnecessary it is for conversation between two people to be at a constant flow, when this old man at the table next to us turned

around and asked me if I was wearing an Oxford University sweatshirt because I was from Oxford. I told him I got it at the mall. Later, as he was leaving, he said that he only asked because he and his family were from Oxford, and had to go catch a plane now.

Then it occurred to me: I was in Oxford when I was nine years old. Wouldn't it be wild if I had known that guy?

So, anyhow, you're probably wondering what this has to do with "The Science Project." Well, I'll tell you. This lengthy introduction is designed to prove that emotional responses can be drawn at any time, just as they can be ignored at any time. This is all dependent on circumstances, as we shall see.

TSP

Our main objective for today, then, is to see just what kind of responses people display when they listen to different types of music. For the sake of brevity, and because we all know the classical era was boring, our analysis today shall deal with a comparison of reactions to Baroque, Romantic, and rock music, excluding from the survey music of the pre-Baroque (Gregorian chant), Classical, and modern eras. Responses will be measured by change of heartbeat and physical reactions.

Our hypothesis, then, since we are required to have one in "The Science Project," will be this: Rock music will have a more dramatic effect on the heartbeat and physical reactions of the listener than Romantic piano or orchestral music, and Romantic music will have a greater effect on the same variables than Baroque keyboard music or chamber music.

Incidentally , I had initially intended to make this a paper dealing with the effects of different types of music on the performers, but I scotched this idea when I considered the fact that the muscular activity involved in performing music would itself change the performer's heartbeat and interfere with the results.

TSP

For our experiment, the third necessary component of "The Science Project," I will measure and record the heartbeat fluctuations and physical reactions of two subjects who submit to this experiment.

Let me introduce you to Subject A.

Subject A is a pianist/keyboardist who plays in various rock bands throughout Tampa. He is classically trained, but has strong leanings toward popular music and jazz. He is a senior at Chamberlain High School, where he is president of concert chorus and very active in different musical organizations.

Subject A was asked to listen to a piece by Franz Liszt titled Remeniscences de Don Giovanni, based on the opera by Mozart.[2]

As soon as the opening chords were played, he grew very irritable, because the turntable was turning too fast, and it made the piece sound like it was in the wrong key. He really didn't want to listen to it, but it was in the name of science, so he went along with it. By the time the thing was over, his heartbeat had doubled and he was on the verge of never listening to classical music again.

The sample of Baroque music played was Bach's Brandenburg

Concerto #1. Our subject reported no mood changes and no heartbeat fluctuations. He commented later that he felt most Baroque music was like that to him, and it almost never affected him at all.

Moving on with the experiment, our anonymous subject was asked to listen to the song by the Moody Blues which I mentiomed earlier titled "Question." He refused, however, and asked to listen to "Too Cold", by Naked Eyes. I complied, thinking it would make a difference if he heard what he wanted to hear.

He marvelled at the song, for some reason. He commented throughout on the pianist in the song, and he grew tense with the words. His heartbeat doubled from 114 beats per minute to nearly 240. He got up and walked around the room several times. He started talking about sex, and then he suddenly had to go to the bathroom.

Later, he said he was so taken by the Naked Eyes song because the words were very appropriate to his present situation. He said he could have been just as taken by any piece of Franz Liszt if he had the lyrics to go with it. I didn't understand this until later.

Subject B is myself, whom I do not need to introduce, and I dom't want to either, lest I take the risk of sounding conceited, which seems to happen all too frequently these days.

Anyhow, before I get off the subject again, I will describe my own reactions to hearing the Liszt piece.

I first heard this piece two years ago, and at the time, I was unfamiliar with it. When I heard it, I was totally fired up afterwards, and I wanted to play it myself. My breathing rate

increased noticeably, and my heartbeat at least doubled; unfortunately, I wasn't taking notes, so I can't measure the differences, but I will vow to the fact that the differences were tremendous.

Today, if I hear the piece again, I am not so moved by it. Why is this so? Allow me to suggest a possible solutiom.

Two years ago, I was in search of the most difficult piano music known to man; as far as I was concerned, the more difficult it was to play, the better music it was.

The day I heard it, the person who played it for me had been previewing the piece as "the hardest piece ever written" for the piano, and I was ready to be thrilled by it. I was so taken by it that I actually tried to learn it; I did succeed in learning parts of it, but the piece is twenty minutes long, and it would take me years to learn it completely.

So what about the Baroque piece?

On numerous occasions, I have felt my heartbeat slow down upon hearing certain pieces from the Baroque era. When I listened to Bach's Brandenberg Concerto #2 for this experiment, I registered the same effects. My heartbeat slowed down from 120 beats a minute to about 100. I also felt quite relaxed and ready to start anew with life.[3]

As far as the rock music effects go, I pretty much already described them. However, certain songs are special to me, and the slow middle section of "Question" is among them.

TSP

It seems natural now that I would draw my conclusion, the

last required component of "The Science Project."

Taking the loosely associated facts that we have here regarding music and its effects on people, I have come to a few conclusions. The first one is that music does affect people whether they like it or not, and these effects can vary depending on the circumstances of the listener. The same is true of life occurances. At 1:00 A.M., the man from Oxford had a profound effect on me only because I was very tired and susceptible to any wierd occurance like this one. If I had met this man during the afternoon in an airport, I would not have been so touched. If I heard the Franck Quintet for the first time today, I would probably not remember it next week. But I did hear it when I was ready to be swept away by something, and it made all the difference.

My second comclusion is that rock music is more effective at creating an effect than Romantic or Baroque music, because it is so much easier to understand. We don't know why Beethoven wrote his fifth symphony, but we can be fairly certain why John Lennon wrote "Back in the U.S.S.R." We need only listen to the words of that famous song to understand its meaning. We could listen to a Beethoven symphony a thousand times and still never understand it.

I would hate to call rock music a cop-out, but it begins to look like that in comparison to much classical music.

My last conclusion is that all music in any form is a realization of some sort of energy from the composer. How constructive that energy is depends on the intellect of the composer. In most popular music, this energy is more tangible than it would be in most classical music.

FOOTNOTES

1.) Keyboard music from the Baroque era is today called "keyboard" music instead of piano music because the piano was yet to be invented. Keyboard music was so-called because it was written for any of three instruments, the harpsichord, organ, or clavichord.

2.) For the increasing number of you out there who don't seem to know, "Mozart" is pronounced "mot sart ," not "Moe's Art.2 We wouldn't want to confuse the great composer with the lesser-known Moe's Art Paint-By-Number company. (Actually, this company is fictitious.)

It is estimated that seven out of ten Jesuit graduates cannot correctly pronounce "Mozart."

3.) Isn't that corny? By the way, John Barrymore once said of footnotes such as these: "A footnote is like running downstairs during the first night of marriage to answer the doorbell." Do you agree?

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